

1 | OBJECTIVITY AND MUSICAL MEANING

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In this essay I will use Roger Scruton's analysis of how we hear music to show that musical understanding can occur at two levels. I will then argue for a specific standard of musical meaning based on Scruton's criterion for objectivity and Frege's notions of understanding and meaning as presented in Scruton's work. On the basis of this standard of meaning, I will conclude meaning is legitimately found in music, but only at one of the possible levels of understanding.

In his book *Understanding Music*, Roger Scruton anatomises the process whereby humans hear music. He maintains that it is a three-step process: 'There is a vibration in the air; by virtue of this vibration we hear a sound, which is a 'secondary object', heard as a pure event; and in this sound we hear an organisation that is not reducible to any properties of the sound, nor to any properties of the vibration that caused it' (2009: 47).

This description intentionally discounts the physical object whose vibrations caused those in the air, and to which we typically attribute noise, such as a musical instrument. That Scruton should ignore the physical cause of sound is unsurprising, given that his theory of meaning depends upon the ascription of a 'virtual

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causality' that he believes can only be imparted to pure events.² A more inclusive and exhaustive description of the hearing process than Scruton provides will be helpful here.

First, a physical object vibrates. The vibration sends waves through the air. Our eardrums convert these vibrations into electronic signals in the brain. The brain interprets the electronic signals and projects into the consciousness of the agent the sensory experience of sound. It is at this point in the process that the noise is either interpreted as 'music' or not. Scruton claims that the quality of 'music' is something rational beings attribute to the noise. He supports this belief by claiming that the properties of music are not reducible to either the basic qualities of the noise or the airwaves that caused the noise. In other words, music could never be described strictly in terms of the properties of sound or airwaves.

A few points are valuable to note here. For Scruton, hearing music in sound is an active process requiring cognitive abilities that are only possessed by rational beings: 'Only a rational being [...] can experience sound in this way; hence, although *we* can hear music in the songs of birds [...] they themselves are deaf to it' (2009: 5). To illustrate, consider a C.D. player playing in the forest, where there is no one there to hear it. Does it make a sound? No. It creates airwaves but they are not converted into electronic impulses or psychological noise. Then, even less so does it make music. According to Scruton, even if animals were present to experience the noise, there would still be no music because they don't have the sort of consciousness that can organise sounds in the appropriate way.

The mental action of hearing music in sound occurs at an instinctual level. Similarly to hearing speech, we don't need to conceptualise what we hear in order to understand it. It happens automatically. But, also like speech, a higher level of understanding also exists. A grammarian may study the structure of a sentence, and a rhetorician may study the way language affects humans emotionally. A higher-level understanding of music, then, would include meta-knowledge of musical structures such as tones, rhythms, melodies, etc. This may include the abil-

2 For example, this refers to events that are divorced from their causes and physical space.

ity to recognise these structures, as well as the way they combine to affect a listener.

This begs the question: can we hear music without understanding it? I would argue that we could not. In agreement with Scruton, I hold that the very act of hearing music implies an instinctual understanding. Without this instinctual understanding a song would sound like mere noise to us, much the same way completely foreign languages sound like noise. Please note that in this paragraph I am using the term 'understanding' to refer to the cognitive act that would correspond to objective understanding. In other words, if what a listener thought they understood was in fact correct. With this sense of understanding, someone can 'understand' a work of music without that music having any actual meaning.

There seem to be two separate levels of musical understanding. The first one is instinctual like speech recognition, and occurs any time something is recognised as music. The other is intellectual and involves conceptual understanding of the music that is heard. By analogy, someone may understand the brilliance of a rhetorical speech because they understand the principles of rhetoric the speaker used. Another man in the audience was simply carried away by the speech. On the opposite side, a composition may invert all the principles of music very deliberately, a demonstration that shows a mastery and knowledge of all elements by their very reversal. The connoisseurs may appreciate this move, though not the lay audience. The serial music of Schoenberg may be an example of this.

All this suggests that music can have meaning on at least two basic levels. The second axis of musical meaning is the dichotomy between musical and extra-musical meaning. I assert that on a general level musical meaning can all be classified according to the following pairs of categories: instinctual/intellectual and musical/extra-musical.

A real world example from Berlioz' *Symphonie Fantastique* can help illustrate these four basic concepts and the way they are employed. In the closing section of this work a church hymn called *Dies Irae*, a very popular and well-known work at the time of the symphony's release, is 'burlesqued'. It is altered in a way to express sacrilege. This musical variation has extra-musical meaning because it relies on the cultural reference in the mind of the lis-

tener between the song and church services. This happens on an intellectual level and requires the conceptual recognition of the cultural meaning of the piece. What makes this example particularly interesting is that it *also* operates as musical (as opposed to non-musical) meaning on the instinctual level. A listener would instinctively relate what they hear to the original and hear musical relations, not just in the piece itself, but also between the altered piece and its original. It should be noted that extra-musical meaning can also be paired with instinctual understanding, and purely musical meaning can certainly be paired with intellectual understanding.

Keeping these notions in mind about the ways music can express meaning, I will now return to Scruton's theory of objectivity. Then, I will examine the implications of his theory for the types of musical meaning I introduced above.

Because Scruton's theory that sounds are a 'pure event' opens him up to objections about the objective nature of sound (also referred to as *audibilia*), he presents an argument for the objective nature of sound experience. The claim that sound has the potential to be objective is important for me in this paper, not because it is crucial for the theory of 'pure events', but because it is essential in order for there to be meaning in music at all, or so I will argue.

Scruton introduces the idea of objectivity by comparing sound experience to rainbows, which he calls 'real and objective'. He claims that rainbows existed before there were people to see them (implying that sound also existed before there were people to hear it). Namely, because, 'the truth about rainbows consists in the truth of a counter-factual, concerning what normal observers *would* see where their eyes turned in a certain direction' (2009: 24).

The crux of his statement is the term 'normal observer'. I can only imagine this meaning simply by what *most people* would see. In other words, the objective quality of an object of experience is determined by, well, consensus. This may seem strange, but in my opinion, using consensus as the criterion defining objective reality is our only option, not just for audibilia or rainbows, but also for any sense experience whatsoever. How could we ever determine what we considered objective but by uniformity of experience? Even if I saw something with my own eyes, if everyone

around me denied seeing it, I would start to question my vision, not theirs.

Now, consider the fact that our senses don't always agree. When they don't we have a hierarchy according to which we rank the reliability of their respective impressions. Tactile is the current popular objective standard; if we can see something but can't feel it we say it is not actually there. We say that we are hallucinating. In contrast, if we feel something in front of us that we cannot see, we do not say we are having tactile hallucinations. Instead we would likely assume something was wrong with our vision. We use tactile sense as the 'objective' standard because it has shown to be the most reliable, i.e., uniform. In essence, since it is a four-dimensionally framed sense, we take a four-dimensional framework to be the ultimate basis of the physical world.

The point is that all of experience is ultimately subjective and the word 'objective' is simply applied to the sense perceptions that are the most uniform, or have the strongest consensus. Now, the quality of 'objective' has fuzzy boundaries. There is no specific proportion of the population that would have to experience something in the same way for it to be considered objective, or at least Scruton doesn't provide one.

As for audibilia, however, Scruton asserts objectivity. This is an interesting claim for two reasons, and both are related to his notion of 'pure events'. Firstly, because he denies the centrality of the one characteristic linking sound to the four-dimensional physical space we find so secure: its locational aspect. Secondly, because he denies the primacy of sound's other link to four-dimensional space: its cause.

Regardless of Scruton's claims regarding the status of sounds as pure events, I think he is right that we all tend to have pretty uniform experiences as far as noise itself (audibilia). The music we attribute to the noise, however, is subject to quite a bit of disagreement.

I will now explore the implications of this disagreement for meaning in music. In *Wittgenstein On Music* Scruton references Frege's revelation about the notion of meaning: 'The meaning of a sentence is what we understand when we understand it' (2009: 34). Similarly, to other words like 'purpose' or 'value', 'meaning' is often employed as if it did not require an agent. The literal, 'what is an objects purpose/value/meaning?', logically requires

the addition of: *for whom?* Music, therefore, can only be meaningful in the mind of an agent capable of ascribing meaning. Overwhelming agreement on a meaning judgment may lead a group of people to speak as though meaning resided in the object itself. Strictly speaking, however, this is false. Meaning, then, is distinct from the object and resides in the mind.

But, in order to know whether someone accurately understands the music we would first have to know what the music means. Thus, we are left without a foundation for determining the objective meaning of any music. I assert that when no individual's understanding is objectively verifiable, the remaining criterion for a standard of meaning, and thus, of correct understanding is that of consensus. Scruton makes the crucial observation, 'The connection has to be made in the understanding, and this understanding is part of a complex social process'.

In other words, your interpretation is correct if it is shared with the most people. When applied to musical meaning, an acceptable reformation of Scruton's counter-factual basis for the objectivity of sound experience, would be: a musical piece means what most people understand, when they think they understand it.

Meaning absolutely does not exist *in* a piece of music. A piece of music has the potential to have meaning *for someone*. I am arguing that, though a piece might be found 'meaningful' by someone, they cannot be said to understand the music unless the meaning they understand is objective, i.e., shared by most other people.

Interestingly, this move parallels the way Scruton characterises sound experience. He recognises that sound occurs in the individual, but that we can attribute it to objective reality, at least, to the degree in which there is a consensus of experience. I am claiming that while Scruton's argument for the objectivity of sound experience (audibilia) is inevitable, his conception of objectivity, though imprecise, could be applied to musical meaning. This, in order to show that as a result of the extreme variability of responses and interpretations, in many cases, music simply doesn't have a meaning.

If I were to guess at the cause of the conflicting responses to music, I might speculate that because very few consequences follow disagreement or misunderstanding of meaning in music, it has never been necessary to develop a precise vocabulary of mu-

sical experience. This, in turn, would have augmented the likelihood of differing interpretations. As a language, the spoken word is much more precise than music, given that we constantly rely on it to make crucial decisions. If the lives of our family members often depended on information held by a person who could only communicate by the violin, a specific vocabulary of tones would presumably rapidly develop.

Something means whatever we understand when we understand it, and we only understand it when we interpret it in a way conformable to a standard of interpretation, dictated by a majority consensus. Thus, in many cases music cannot be said to have an objective meaning. Please note that I am absolutely not denying that we all feel certain things in response to music. Rather, what I am denying is that what any of us feels in the music is necessarily what the music can legitimately be said to mean.

It might be objected that a musical meaning can be objectively imbued in a work by the author. There are problems with this view, however, which parallel that of the intentional fallacy in literary analysis. Firstly, an incapable author may try with all his might to imbue a work with a specific meaning and fail to do so. Secondly, meaning may be taken as that which was in no way intended by the author. This shows that authorial intent is neither a necessary nor sufficient cause for the perception of meaning in a musical work.

It is true that if an author were to outright tell you what he intended a piece to mean, it may affect the way you interpret it. For instance, Beethoven describing the first four notes of the Fifth Symphony as, 'Fate knocking at the door', gives us an example. But, this would affect us in a similar way whether or not it was the author telling us this, or whether or not it was actually the author's intent to express it in the piece. The fact is, the consideration of authorial intent in the interpretation of a musical piece neither commonly occurs in popular practice nor is often a practicable option, particularly with many composers that are no longer present.

Another alternative for a standard of meaning would be consensus among experts. On a technical level there seems to be more agreement among experts about the meaning of certain works than in the public at large. Restricting to experts the population from which consensus can be drawn is an interesting move.

But, even among experts there is far too much disagreement for any particular understanding to qualify as objective, though at times certain interpretations do approach it. For instance, many people claim Beethoven's Fourth Movement in the Fifth Symphony is 'heroic'.

What then do the authors create and how do they attempt to communicate meaning? It would stand to reason that they rely on their own musical understanding (intellectual and instinctual). They attempt to communicate what *they* hear when they listen to a musical phrase, and assume it is applicable to their audience. When a composer creates, her work is informed either by the way these processes of instinctual and intellectual application to noise of music and meaning occur within herself, how she expects these processes to operate in others, or a combination of the two.

The composer recognises the principles whereby listeners apply music to sound and manipulates it for her own purposes. While in theory any air vibrations whatsoever could be interpreted to have the greatest musical profundity this is generally not the case, and as I will show later there is found to be much agreement in instinctual musical understanding. A composer, then, creates sound forms that she believes are likely to be clothed by a listener as music either in the same way she does, or at least in some generally similar way.

Unsurprisingly, the responses to various pieces change over time. Pieces have undoubtedly meant different things at different times. It is a legitimate question whether anyone today experiences classical pieces from the past the same way as when they were first produced, even though the noise dictated by the pieces has not changed. Their meaning changes, or more accurately, the meaning we place onto them changes. And, since this meaning is much of the import of a musical piece in the first place, pieces are surprisingly unstable entities. It is a hallmark of a lasting work that it talks to the less fleeting parts of the human spirit.

Given the high instability of interpretive responses to music I think Scruton's criterion for objectivity applied to meaning implies that a fair amount of music simply has no meaning. That is not to say that we don't all have experiences when we listen to it. It is just saying that we cannot properly be said to 'understand' it, or that it has meaning. Our listening experiences, instead, more

closely resemble a populace on LSD; each person having their own unique experience of music with no major consensus occurring, or necessary. This is not necessarily a bad thing.

The diversity of meaning results in no universally, and in many cases even generally, accepted standard of understanding for a given phrase, work, movement, or idea. Only in the disciplines of musicians themselves, does meaning become more generally agreed upon, as it is used more often and with more consequences than for the average listener. But, as Scruton notes, even basic terms like 'high' and 'low' are spatial metaphors and non-essential as far as possible ways of interpreting and thinking about music.

There is, however, a persuasive counter-example. Scruton discusses an analogy made by Wittgenstein between instinctual musical understanding and the recognition of meaning in facial expressions. People often see the same thing in a face even if they describe it in different terms or respond differently to it. So, though descriptions of music may differ, they may simply be descriptions of their different responses to the same type of instinctual, recognitional type of understanding. This shows how objective meaning can exist even when descriptions differ. As Wittgenstein and Scruton note, however, we would have to look elsewhere than verbal description for evidence of understanding. Wittgenstein presents us with just such an option: their behavior.

Behavioral responses can be considered an acceptable way of demonstrating understanding. If a person responds to an angry face by becoming defensive it is a strong case for them having recognised its meaning. If this were so with music, then, it would still have to be discovered in some observable way that the music was understood. This does in fact occur. There is often consensus in the physical ways people respond to music. They may all dance, grow solemn, sing along, etc., which all testifies to a uniformity of instinctual musical understanding. It is reasonable to assume there is meaning in music, if only at the instinctual level, because of the similarity of behavioral responses we observe. If this is so, then, an objective has been found and people can legitimately be said to correctly or incorrectly understand any given piece in at least one respect.

Scruton proposes a standard of objectivity for audibilia dependent upon consensus of experience. This implies that they are

all ultimately subjective but we can and should refer to them as objective to the degree with which they are uniform. I agree with this standard and even consider it applicable all the way down to our most reliable tactile sense perceptions.

I feel, however, that Scruton underestimates the implications of this view for musical meaning. It is true for the objective world; it is certainly true for meaning and language. I conclude that objective musical meaning does exist at the instinctual level because there is consensus of understanding that can be inferred from the similar responses people have; observable other than by verbal description, as per Wittgenstein, and behavior. In other words, meaning in music happens when we all feel the desire to dance to the beat.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

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